The Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project

Interview about Sarah Piatt with Dr. Larry R. Michaels by Dr. Elizabeth Renker
October 10, 2017 (Fremont, Ohio)

ER: This is Professor Elizabeth Renker from the Department of English at The Ohio State University, and I have the fantastic opportunity here today sitting in Fremont, Ohio at the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library to talk with Dr. Larry R. Michaels, the scholar who produced the first modern edition of Sarah Piatt's poetry, titled *That New World: Selected Poems of Sarah Piatt 1861-1911*, published in 1999. And Dr. Michaels and I are going to have a conversation about how he came to find Sarah Piatt, leading to the publication of his groundbreaking edition. So Larry, thank you for talking with us today.

LM: Thank you.

ER: Can you tell us about how this book came to be? How did you find Sarah?

LM: Well, thank you Elizabeth; first of all, thanks for inviting me to be recorded here today, and I hope that might be "fantastic," but anyway, it's an honor. And Sarah Piatt – it was kind of -- I found her by chance. Just because I like poetry, I've read poetry all my life. And I like to scour obscure volumes to look for poems that might stand out, that people aren't aware of the author. I mean, a lot of well-known poems are single poems by an author. So I'm always looking around. And I was reading Emerson Venable's *Poets of Ohio*, and Emerson was a son of William Henry Venable, who was well-known. And so, reading through Emerson Venable, he's got about 20 poets in there of Ohio, people like the Cary Sisters and Edith Thomas and some of those Gilded Age poets (or earlier). And then I started reading these poems that just were like none of the others and just really stood out. They were direct, they were very clear, they were passionate about their topic, they discussed things in ways that weren't conventional that you read in most poetry of that era. And I remember the one especially was called

"No Help." It was a poem of grief about losing, either it was one of the sons, the first son Victor, or a baby, it's hard to tell. And there was no consolation for the grief, you know--"heaven lies too far," "my way to him through utter darkness lies"--it's just she cannot be reconciled and she finds no comfort and it ends with: "God cannot help me," because "God cannot break his own dark law for my poor sorrow's sake." And that's just not like *anything* of that era, because usually there's consolation in heaven. And she says: "Do I want a little angel? No, I want my child." And even in bitter pain she would call him back again--even if he had to suffer--because her grief is so intense. And I'm just thinking at the time that this is really different, this is direct, this speaks to right now, over a century later, just as strong as it did then. And then reading some of the other poems--and then you discover her poems with children, where she can be whimsical and teasing, and writing, actually, beautiful dialogue poems in really tight verse in tight rhyme schemes. And just this facility she has as a poet, but also how she can express these things. And I'm thinking you don't read these kind of monologues or dialogues between [Robert] Browning and [Robert] Frost. I mean you don't read that in poems like you find in that era usually. So I just got curious about her and started looking for more of her poems. You can go to Stedman's anthology published in 1900 *[Stedman, An American Anthology 1787-1900]*, the comprehensive nineteenth-century anthology, and he had included quite a few of her poems. And then find out she had published all these books! And that her husband was well known and connected with Howells and all these connections. Then you find out: then she was in Ireland and Washington D.C. And then you find out: she has written not only about grief and childhood, but also about slavery and the Civil War. Here she was from Kentucky, royalty in Kentucky really. Boone! Daniel Boone family and the Bryans and the settlers of Lexington. An educated and well-known poet in Kentucky before she even got married. Then she marries the guy from Ohio, they live outside of Cincinnati, she's looking right across the Mason-Dixon line, and during the Civil War she's in Washington when the Battle of First Bull Run was fought, and right involved in all of these things. And she writes about the Civil War. She writes about the battlefields. She writes about – of

course— the North and the South, about slavery; she writes about marriage, she writes about losing children. She lost two, tragically. And then she goes to Ireland when John was Consul there [U.S. Consul, Cork] and writes these poems about Ireland that are just fascinating. And what a variety of poems she wrote. I mean it's just amazing to me.

ER: So you were engaged in a scholar adventure [laughter].

LM: Yeah I was!

ER: It's a term you and I have shared. I know that a lot of the students listening to this will be interested in hearing about the practicalities of that. How did you go after searching for an author that basically nobody had heard of?

LM: You know that's a good question and – well, you know, Elizabeth, certainly -- you just keep digging around in these early anthologies and books that people aren't reading much anymore, and you find her anthologized quite a bit. And then you can actually find her books. They're all expensive now.

ER: They weren't when you started, right?

LM: No, you could go online and bid on eBay [laughter]. We joke because we bid against each other!

ER: Wait--I should add a footnote for the audience that Larry and I first met in a bidding war over Sarah Piatt books on eBay.

LM: Yes.

ER: That is how we met finally.

LM: I know.

ER: And now we're fast friends.

LM: And she's forgiven me [laughter].

ER: He won every time. You got every book [laughter]. So you'd go and look at places like eBay just to see what was out there?

LM: Well, eventually to get her books, and actually Toledo Lucas County Public Library has three of them.

ER: Is that right?

LM: But we can't find them--because they're in their stacks collection in the warehouse because they hadn't circulated for 20 years or something. And so, you try to find these books, and you go back and actually try to read the books in context -- she's putting together the book in a thematic way -- and just find all the poems you can. I just found more and more. I think "A Pique at Parting" was in Venable's book, but most of them were more traditional ones, "A Witch in the Glass," or something. And so you want to get into her books. And then I was aware of the Piatt Castles down in West Liberty, Ohio.

ER: You had heard of that already?

LM: Oh yeah, because I like history. There was a name connection, so I went down there and met Margaret Piatt. And Margaret was big on Donn Piatt, her family, and the connections with John James and so, lo and behold!, in one of the Castles, in the library, up on the ceiling is a glass panel with Sarah's picture in it. And so you're just finding these things. And so Margaret let me go up in the attic at that time. There was a little nook in the attic where they had *The Capital.*

ER: *The Capital* is the Washington D.C. newspaper published by Donn Piatt.

LM: Yes.

ER: And our audience might not be familiar with that because it's a very, very rare periodical but a great historical record of Washington D.C. politics during the Reconstruction period. And Donn published numerous poems by Sarah in *The Capital.*

LM: That's right.

ER: So you had your hands on *The Capital* in the Piatt Castles at a time when no one had heard of the newspaper or of Sarah, and you were right there in the primary sources.

LM: Right there in the primary sources in this little nook in the attic. And of course I couldn't photocopy anything. So my wife, Susie, was there, and she was copying down the poems out of the newspaper and I'm just looking through, page by page, because it wasn't indexed or anything. And some of them were unattributed and you just had to kind of go by the sound of it. And I was just learning about her at the time. And you'd kind of hear her voice in some, but you weren't sure. And so we had to go back and dig around and research that too.

ER: So that's an interesting topic, I think, for a lot of people in our audience. At this point did you know you were working on a selected edition?

LM: No, just curious and just accumulating poems. And that's why it's so nice to be able to think now that Ohio State is building this collection and digitizing things and making things available for future students and scholars--because she's worth it. But then, of course, *The Capital*, writing those all down and going back and typing them up, and then I went to Louisville, and they have in the library there on microfilm the *Louisville Journal* where she was published by [editor George D.] Prentice so many times. That's where she first became well known in Kentucky before she was married to John James. And so then you go through that microfilm and you find some of these and some--you know, this was poems not really published later in books--they were just --I don't want to say "juvenile" poems because they were good, a lot of them, but her first poems, first publications. And so a lot of them had her name on it because Prentice really promoted her. And so you find those there, and then so you're writing those down. Or printing some out. Just collecting those poems, which are now becoming better known through Ohio State, again, and the work of some students and researchers.

ER: And of course she wasn't--as you mentioned a minute ago--it's important for students especially to realize that when you're researching that stage of her career, you're not looking for "Sarah Piatt" because she's not married yet, so her name's appearing under a lot of different forms when she's a young poet.

LM: Yeah because Prentice, her name was Sarah Morgan -- that was the mother's name actually the descended from – er --or father's name, I guess I don't know for sure, but descended from Boone. Because Boone's wife was a Morgan. Sarah Morgan, I think it was, and that's where she got her name. But anyway it was "Sallie Bryan" was the most common. She was a Bryan, Sallie Bryan or sometimes Sarah Bryan. Sometimes just "poem by Sallie," or something like that, and you just kind of had to read it and figure it out. This was back in the early to mid-nineties.

ER: That you were down there?

LM: Down there doing all this. There was a librarian down there named -- I think her name was -- Sarah Gray, who helped me a lot. She was a friend of somebody I knew. And so the *Louisville Journal* provided a lot of information, and it was just so much fun.

ER: So how had you pieced together that if you went to Louisville, you should be able to find stuff? Getting back in touch with your scholar adventure – you had poems under her married name, Piatt, in Venable and Stedman.

LM: Yeah, and there were little biographical sketches by Stedman, because they were close. You know, the letters of Stedman we didn't know about at the time, but – he'd do a little biographical information. And then we went from Louisville down to the seminary she attended down there.

ER: Henry Female Seminary?

LM: Henry Female Seminary in New Castle, and of course it's not there, but we found her marriage license because she was married there too. She lived with [her paternal aunt] Annie Boone down there at that time when they were married. You know, she got married down there. So just trying to piece this stuff together at the time and so we visited these sites and gathered everything we could, and I just kept looking for poems, basically that was all it was, and finding her books online and wherever and then just collecting them. And then the more poems I found, the better I liked her, and the variety of poems, like I mentioned. And so then I just started putting together in a book-- because I'd done several local history books and different kinds of ways to put books together--just to do it myself. And talked to Margaret Piatt about it and through the Castles. And actually Ohio State was thinking of publishing it, but – you probably know this story, don't you, Elizabeth?

ER: I don't know that if I know the whole story.

LM: They sent it out to Paula [Bernat Bennett] as a reader. And Paula was working on her own book, that was what had happened, and so they didn't want to do two at the same time.

ER: And so tell me a little bit about how you decided on the contents of this volume, having done all of the research you did?

LM: Just collect the poems that I thought were the most representative of all the different topics that she talked about. And try to get the best ones or most representative of that from all the different books over the years – you know -- over a fifty year period of her publishing and it kind of –

ER: Her career really spans that entire second half of the nineteenth century, right? It's one of the amazing things about her.

LM: It does! Yeah, the whole Reconstruction Era, Gilded Age, into the twentieth century. And so, and then there were the poems that were never published in books that we found, like in *The Capital,* some

of the most heart-wrenching poems she wrote, almost bitter in some cases, and the ones that just weren't considered what women should be publishing in that era, you know, they weren't popular. That's one reason why she wasn't as popular as some of the more traditional, flowery poets from that era that are mostly now all forgotten too. She couldn't publish the most difficult poems. And so anything I found that I thought was representative of her best work. But even some of the not-best-work that illustrated other areas of her writing. And just put it all together myself and through the Castles and Margaret we just put it out. Thinking we'll just put this out here and see. And then when Paula's book came out – Paula was really the pioneer in scholarly research, and I got to talk to her several times because she wondered: "who is this guy that's interested?" because Paula had been writing about her and studying her and I had read some of her [Bennett's] articles, and her nineteenth century anthology's a gem.

ER: Her Blackwell anthology (*Nineteenth Century American Women Poets: An Anthology*, Bennett).

LM: -- Her Blackwell anthology that I've used as kind of a diagram for understanding the era and those poets. And so I was really thrilled that she was interested. She was wondering who this guy was, that was researching her, and so we got to talk about stuff too, and when her book came out, that was another really huge boost. And Paula went to people like [Karen L.] Kilcup and some of the other anthologists that were putting together anthologies of that era and getting Sarah's poems in some of those and it just kind of spread. I remember John Hollander mentioned and included – which one was it?

ER: "Giving back the Flower."

LM: "Giving Back the Flower" in his big anthology [*American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century* (The Library of America, 1993)], and it just kind of spread, and now there's so much more interest in her. And it's because of the poetry.

ER: Yeah, she is-- as you know, you and I have had a chance to work together with some of my classes, with undergraduates and graduate students, and my experience, consistently, from the very first time I taught Sarah, which was probably 2001, up to the present time, is that students instantly love her!

LM: Yes.

ER: And given all the knowledge you have about the many poets you mentioned— like you mentioned Edith Thomas and the Cary Sisters and so on--I just wonder what your understanding is about why this should be Sarah's moment? Say – you know – and it's not that Edith Thomas is having a huge resurgence or the Cary Sisters? I mean why it should be Sarah?

LM: Why it's Sarah?

ER: Around the year 2000?

LM: Well, first, just let me say though your influence has been a really good big part of that. Because you are such a great combination of researcher and teacher. The way you work with students and getting your students involved with it. And a lot of your students have done some really good things.

ER: We have seen amazing student work on Sarah at Ohio State, absolutely.

LM: Your students have really--and that's why Ohio State is so important in being a center for Sarah. Elizabeth, you're doing tremendous work on her and that's helping so much. But it has to go back to the poetry – I mean that's what it's all based on. It's not because she was such an important historical figure of the era or had such an influence. I mean she just wrote some – had this gift – she'd just write these poems and -- my wife just walked in so I had to pause.

ER: That's okay [laughter].

LM: And so it comes back to the poetry. Like you say, the students now in the twenty-first century can read her and are attracted to her because she speaks to the human heart; that is timeless. I mean that's the gift. That's what poetry is.

ER: Now, going back to the research you were doing when you were discovering her, you also sorted through a lot of the reviews and so on of her work. And so in your view, was the reaction her poetry was getting in her own time different from the reaction you're seeing her get now? This is the topic that's always of interest to students.

LM: Yes, yes.

ER: Earlier you said you felt as a lover of poetry and a scholar of poetry--you feel that her voice is distinctive among other poets and among other women poets of the time.

LM: Yes.

ER: And she was widely reviewed. Do you feel that there is a big difference between what people got from her poetry then and what they're getting now?

LM: Yes, I think they appreciate her more now. Like I said, you know, at the time she just was considered too outspoken or controversial or honest, maybe. What they expected from poetesses or the women poets that were popular at that time--you know they couldn't just come out and question God. They couldn't come out and speak out against the society or the male-dominated things, or marriage problems or honest grief, like we said, or Civil War or slavery, or all these issues that she deals with. And in a way that's more meaningful now than people appreciated then. And so yeah, that's why I'd like to find out how many copies Houghton Mifflin published of the books. It's hard to get that information. Whether it was 500 or what or..?

ER: Good question.

LM: Yeah, and because the books are scarce today and they're hard to find, but maybe they're just buried in libraries here and there, or there are a lot more around than we think.

ER: Yes, right.

LM: But they didn't sell real big. They didn't make a lot of money.

ER: Yeah, good point.

LM: And another thing too – you got to give John credit. John James. You got to give him credit because he's the one that sent it out. And even after she became more well-known in a way—that his poems faded, you know, in his life time kind of faded away. He still sent her stuff out and anthologized her in *The Hesperian Tree* and went to editors promoting her, and Stedman and anthologizing her, and John James promoted all that, and she gave him credit for that because she didn't really care. She wrote them for herself. She didn't really care what other people thought and she didn't want a lot of critical acclaim. And it was kind of – like [Emily] Dickinson almost -- that's a whole different thing. She just wasn't interested in being published and well known as a poet. She wrote these because it was her honest heart pouring out. And I like that about her. I really do.

ER: Can you talk a little bit more about the ways that John James, her husband, managed her career? For people in our audience who don't really know that much about nineteenth century writing habits. What did that mean when you say he was promoting her?

LM: It was--in a way it was the first time that women had access to publication a lot. And poetry was read by everybody, and it was a lot of publications. And so everybody was publishing: in *Scribner's, The Century*, *Atlantic Monthly,* all the publications and many more, and so John would kind of take charge. He knew the editors, you know, and through [William Dean] Howells and all these, he was connected with Stoddard and all these people, and so he'd just send stuff out; he kept sending stuff out. And there

was a market for it and the publication of her books. Because Houghton Mifflin was a big publisher of poetry, and so he had access to all of that. He was librarian at the Library of Congress and then later [U.S.] Consul to Ireland [Cork]. He had a lot of connections, even though he never made much money. But he did have access, and he'd just kept sending things out and putting her out there. And so that's why we have all of the books still that were published and all of these poems can still be found and accessed today. She didn't have to just go and publish privately one or two little books of her own. He had the access for --

ER: Now you mentioned earlier that you think that a lot of the poems that appeared in places like *The Capital*, in periodicals that were not collected in books, might have been more controversial poems.

LM: Yes.

ER: So do you, do we have to guess about who decided which poems would be in her books?

LM: That's a good question, isn't it? That's something that'd be fun to dig around in, isn't it?

ER: Yes, it takes us back to scholar adventures and it's surprising when you rediscover an author, it's, I think--.

LM: It's a whole new ball game.

ER: Once you say this to general readers, they say "of course, that makes sense," but until you explain, until scholars create biographies and editions and so on, all you have is stuff and gaps that have to be filled, right?

LM: Yeah, I mean they [published accounts of the Piatts in the nineteenth century] always mention all this collection of books they [the Piatts] had and autographs and everything and then they [the Piatts] had the fire [in their home] and where'd all that stuff go? Is it lost? Where are their papers?

ER: Can you talk about the fire?

LM: The fire in North Bend [Ohio] after they came back from Ireland and England and settled back in North Bend. They had a terrible fire there at the-- "River Brow," it was called, the house there in North Bend. And we don't know how much was lost or that, and not much was published after that. And they had both faded into obscurity by that time, and so there wasn't a lot of other writing about either one of them. And so where is all that? Where did it go? Is it in the library somewhere? Or passed on through Cecil [their youngest child] and the family? So: scholar adventures! You know, for scholars and for students, I just want to say--if you're interested in her and read her and like her, there's all kinds of opportunities to explore these things.

ER: And how about in your various travels? You mentioned some of the kinds of hunting you did and I know you've done other things too that we haven't had the chance to talk about yet, but what's your sense of how scattered the materials are and where they might be? For example, correspondence could be anywhere, right?

LM: Yes, yes.

ER: No one has collected it. We don't have a collected edition of her correspondence.

LM: No, see that's another big thing that could be.

ER: I agree--someone has to do that.

LM: I mean, Ohio State has quite a bit and Paula donated a lot and through Pam Kincheloe's researches too and a lot was gathered, but who knows what's over in Ireland, you know? Or England? And [Katherine] Tynan's connections and all those people. Yeats wrote a review. And so where is the stuff? In what libraries could things be? There's just all these opportunities to find things. You could begin with a small collection of the letters, and then it'll just be expanding. This whole thing should be expanding. If

we're right, if her poetry really is canonical and will be read a hundred years from now and appreciated, there's all these opportunities to keep finding. That's what's so fascinating about her. And that's what really pulled me in to begin with, you know, because I just--I love poetry. And you can't help but love her when you read her poetry. And the students that are finding that out now. You know, just if I can just say too, you know that era was pretty much forgotten; there's so many things to kind of dig around in in there. There's not a whole lot in the early Moderns [the Modernist poets] or something that hasn't been studied and all of that, and [T.S.] Eliot, [Ezra] Pound, and all that (which was really my background) [in Dr. Michaels' own English Ph.D. training at University of Toledo], but this era is just so fascinating because of all the little things you can find. And then, like I wrote in the introduction [to his selected edition of Piatt], Dickinson just overshadowed everything and really obliterated all the rest. So, everybody reads Dickinson because she's such a poet, but then they compare everybody to her and say, "Well these poets aren't worth even researching today," because they are dated, they're flowery, whatever. And then here's Sarah-- who isn't--who I think maybe in a hundred years from now they'll look at Dickinson and Piatt saying they're both great poets of totally different style. Because Emily's verbal dynamics, the universal themes of love and nature and grief and whatever – death. And here's Sarah writing about specific things, you know, of the era and bringing those to life in a way that is not just poetic, it's not just great poetry, it's *real life* that she creates in great poetry. It's real human emotions and feelings that are just there and are transmitted-- like I say, some of these grief poems are *something*--or the playfulness with children-- it's universal, and you don't find that in other poets. And it's there, and so I see her as a parallel of Dickinson. I'd say a parallel of that era, the two giants. Maybe, we'll see.

ER: We'll see, right?

LM: Because there's some other ones, there's some good, you know--Elizabeth Stoddard you got to love, [Louise Imogen] Guiney, some of the other writers; but I think here Sarah is, could be, a giant of that era because of the poetry.

ER: Well, you and I have had the occasion to talk many times also about what it means when our culture reclaims a previously unknown author who then becomes great. And a classic example I always talk about is Herman Melville.

LM: Your background in Melville!

ER: Who dies in obscurity [in 1891] and then becomes "great" in the 1920's. So one of the thrilling things about this project, right?, is that we could be at that kind of a cusp with Sarah. And I know certainly I feel that way about her work, and I know you feel that way too, and a lot of the projects we've done together are ones we've conducted in that spirit that we're trying to build things for posterity essentially.

LM: You're doing this, collecting this, and these recordings even, and the archive at Ohio State is really important as we look-- because it's scholars, and it's students, and people who love poetry that this matters to. When you really think about poetry and the great poets, you look at Dickinson, who died unknown, basically; Poe; you look at [Gerard Manley] Hopkins, it wasn't till [poet Robert] Bridges published him in 1918--it was like 30 years after he died before anybody had ever heard of him. And you look at some of the poets that are most loved today--they weren't in their lifetime. And I think Sarah is kind of different because she was published in her lifetime, but wasn't appreciated. And now maybe people can appreciate her better now, like we said.

ER: Now, you mentioned a minute ago, and I wonder if we can return to this topic, you mentioned the Modernist poets and we haven't had a chance to talk about your background as a graduate student and

where, if I recall correctly, you worked mostly on Modernism, right? So can you talk a little about the kind of work you did?

LM: Just very briefly. At University of Toledo, we were fortunate enough to have a scholar there named Noel Stock. He wasn't even really a scholar, because he never graduated from college. But he was the secretary for Ezra Pound at Saint Elizabeth's [psychiatric hospital in Washington, D.C.] when Pound was -- after World War II -- was considered treasonous for the things he said about America from Italy during World War II under Mussolini, and so he [Pound] could have been put to death easily as a traitor. And so what they did, the poets and people kind of got together and said, "We'll just say he was insane," so they put him in Saint Elizabeth's in Washington. And here's Stock was his secretary, and all his correspondence and everything, [Stock] was talking to him during that period in the 1960s not long before he died. And so Stock ends up as this Professor at University of Toledo and was my advisor. And I actually ended up writing about Eliot and his career and his poetry and editorial career, but that period just fascinated me and I love Eliot--and Pound, you can't read anymore [laughs].

ER: This is one of the reasons I got us on this topic, because, as we both know, having conducted our studies at a certain point in history, for a very long time the Modernists were considered to be among the greatest poets and also to have sort obliterated the previous generations of poets, whom they often also denigrated. Here you are, you did your graduate work in that area and then you move further back in the nineteenth century. And I just wonder if you could talk a little bit about how you think our culture has shifted in your lifetime in its understanding of what great poetry is. Do you think that's changing?

LM: Yeah, it's always changing though, I think.

ER: Good.

LM: I really think it is because that's – because I like history, and I see it as cycles, of course, but there's repetitions--like we're talking about the Gilded Age things that you're seeing now in the our culture. You

know, the elements of the Gilded Age now in twenty-first century America. But yeah I think the Modernists--they were so new and revolutionary for that time after so much just kind of trite and, you know, the poets that are mostly forgotten now of the nineties and that-- I mean there was kind of a gap in there between well-known and really good poets. But even they [the Modernists] pretty much--like Frost and they [the Modernists] thought Frost was not really a good poet because he wasn't a Modernist kind of guy and that. So I see it as changing. But I see the – at least my hope always is – the best rises. The talent of Shakespeare wasn't appreciated until what? The mid 1700s. So it takes a while but the universal is always true. The true great does surface in human beings and in poetry, I think. And I kind of rely on that. And things go out of favor for a while, but then they come back and what is really good. I mean, you're not going back to some of these forgotten poets; they're just of their period, of their times. People are always going to be reading Eliot. People are always going to be reading Frost. People are always going to be reading Dickinson. And even Poe – you gotta like Poe [laughter] and those poets, you know? And going back into the great Romantics, these poets, because they speak to the human condition. And I like to think that Sarah is one of those. I really do. I think, you look at the nineteenth century--I think she is. I think she is one of the canonical poets that will be in the canon, and will be read and read on to the future, appreciated as a canonical poet.

ER: Do you have a couple of personal favorites whose titles you might share with us of Sarah's?

LM: Oh there's so many! The Irish poems – you know the Irish poems because you just came back from Ireland.

ER: That's right.

LM: And the one in the cemetery, you know, where Louis [Piatt] was buried.

ER: Louis was her son who drowned.

LM: Her son that drowned there in Ireland and is buried there. And the poem she writes about the cemetery, visiting the cemetery and [Irish poet Charles] Wolfe's grave there, but knowing after she wrote the poem, now we know she had to go back there and her son was buried there. I mean there are so many like that that I just cherish. I mean "Giving Back the Flower," those poems; "The New Thanksgiving," which is kind of bitter irony. The ones about -- the ones with children: "If I Were a Queen" or – if I look at the table of contents real quick. Just so many! I called it [his selected edition] *That New World* because I thought--it's that world, her world is new to us now again through her poems. But the one that Paula [Bernat Bennett] always emphasizes, "The Palace Burner."

ER: That is a great poem.

LM: It is a great poem about the French Revolution [the Paris Commune of 1871]. And the grief poems of course--"Death Before Death" is just a tremendous grief poem. And then there's poems like "After her First Party."

ER: That's a fantastic poem. It teaches great too!

LM: It does, doesn't it?!

ER: You taught it recently too, right?

LM: Yeah, I read it at the Castles this summer. And it's a dialogue with Marian [Marian Prentice Piatt, the oldest child of Sarah and John James], who was a teenage daughter, after her first party. And Marian is all into the boys and what the party was like and what people thought of her. And she's talking to her mother and the daughter asks about: "Did you ever go to a party like that?" Her mother can't imagine it. And she said, yes and there was a boy there and – you know – "Does he write to you?" "He can't write." And you know he's dead, probably died in the Civil War, and of course, the daughter doesn't

understand. The dialogue is in these tight rhyme stanzas that are really tight stanzas but yet it reads just like voices talking to each other, and that's such a gift.

ER: Yeah, and you mentioned earlier that this maybe comes back to something we can flesh out a little bit for our audience. Earlier you mentioned Sarah in the company of Browning and Frost and I think this is the kind of topic you were getting at there, right? It's the way that they write.

LM: There's kind of a bridge.

ER: Natural speech.

LM: Yeah, I mean you read Frost – you know – "The Death of the Hired Man" or some of those, and you read Browning's dramatic monologues, but she writes dialogues. She can write it in dialogues.

ER: Right, yes, that is an amazing thing about her, right? And you have to get when you, when people are reading her for the first time, and of course, styles are very different today, and you almost have to explain to people that they're going to hear multiple voices that won't be identified and not to just get frustrated and give up, right? You're going to see quotation marks; you don't know who's talking; and you have to treat it almost like a puzzle. And once you get it, then you get it.

LM: And you do. And her symbolism even, you know, she does use flowers as symbols or the South as kind of this heavenly—there's a lot of symbolism and you have to pick up the patterns of her symbolism and things like that; you have to work. You have to read her poems several times- you really do. And because it's a lot of historical figures, I mean even the one with children where – "If I Were a Queen" and she's referring to Mark Antony and Cleopatra, and she's referring to all of these historic figures. Her poem about Franklin being stranded in the ice in the Northwest Passage and Lady Franklin. You have to know something and go back and find out what she's talking about and then know some of her symbolism, and it just adds to the impact because the poem itself has an impact at first reading, so you

want to go back and find out more. It's not just a trite poem that you realize there's nothing memorable about it. Does that make sense?

ER: Yeah. Now, given that your selected edition, again, was *the* pioneering publication of her work since her death in 1919, and your book came out in '99, and a lot of things have happened since then and, as you said, wheels are turning, people have gotten interested, there's a growing body of scholarship about her: conference presentations, books, and so on. And I think I mentioned earlier that, among the first wave of scholars who were unbeknownst to one another discovering Piatt at the same time, there was you; there was Paula Bennett; and then Jess [Jessica] Roberts and William Spengemann working on their Penguin edition [1996] that included a Piatt section. And then also Pamela Kincheloe, who was working with Paula Bennett; Pamela was a graduate student at the time. You folks were all in that first wave, and since your pioneering work there's been the second wave of scholars, and that's where people like me got interested, through learning about Sarah through your work. But the rediscovery of Sarah is progressing, and a lot of things still need to be done, so we mentioned earlier: there is no edition of her letters; no one has yet found things we dream of finding. Is there a diary anywhere, for example? There are some family letters; are there more letters out there? Are there more copies of books out there? You mentioned that the books are scarce. And since Sarah Piatt's name, unlike a name like William Shakespeare, it is not well known, there's probably a lot of stuff out there people just don't recognize.

LM: They probably don't know what it is.

ER: Yeah! Why would they know?

LM: Because they've never heard of her.

ER: So we might still find a lot of stuff.

LM: Oh yeah! I'm confident that there will be things.

ER: So on your dream list of things that could A) be found and B) things that we need people to hunt for or publish about Sarah, what's on your dream list in that regard?

LM: I think right now just what you're doing at Ohio State and with students and the archive. But then, also, Paula's book was a really good anthology, but I would like to see an anthology now again, with some of the other people now that are involved with-- and more by themes. You know, the Civil War poems, the grief poems, the Irish. And give a little background on the poem, maybe a little more than just some notes and kind of tell a story of what that was going on at the time and around the whole theme of her passion. I was thinking, if I would do one it'd be the passion of human pain from "Her Word of Reproach," which is another one I like a lot.

ER: It's a fantastic poem. I love that one.

LM: Her passion for all things she had to experience--I mean, just about life, because that poem's about chiding her husband cause he's just satisfied with the platitudes, and "everything will be fine," and she's really in there suffering a lot of times. Just build an anthology around those, with background. Not just the poems sitting there, but the story behind them.

ER: Maybe as kind of a slim anthology for the general reader? Maybe even people who aren't that comfortable with poetry yet--to help them?

LM: Yeah, to bring them into the poem, and then they could see the background of it, say, "In Clonmel Parish" where Louis is [buried]-- you know? And what's she thinking when the poem is written and the whole story. Wouldn't that make a great--parallel pages? If somebody would be interested in doing something like that, that would be what I would do. Now it's hard, being a pastor and everything, it's hard and some of this has been quite a few years ago, but I'd like to see something like that--and just to get her out there more and more into the general schools so young people could read her and get her, like you're doing with your students; and get her out there in an edition. You know, it wasn't until like

[Malcolm] Cowley came out with a Faulkner reader or something and brought attention to him [that William Faulkner became better known]. Do a *Piatt Reader* kind of thing.

ER: And given the pressures on publishers these days, the economic pressures, we might have to think about digital formats for getting some of this stuff out too--also a part of what we're trying to do at Ohio State, make things available more quickly, and if we can't do things in print immediately, to get them in digital form.

LM: Yeah, because you can go online now and her poems are there.

ER: Yes, and people are talking about her poems, you can see that people there are occasionally blog postings, and she's developing an audience among people who aren't necessarily academics, which is going to be very important to her fortunes also.

LM: I think that's the key.

ER: I agree.

LM: Because academia is kind of discovering her and it needs to filter down into the – you know, it takes a little while. You just give people a chance to read her, and it will; if maybe some students could do some background on the poems online and add comments to them, give some background as people are reading, because her poems are hard at first read. And get some background and get people reading them.

ER: Now my last question for you as we're wrapping up today--and thank you again for spending so much time talking.

LM: Thanks for listening.

ER: Because I am myself, as you know, an archive rat. I am fascinated by these stories about how people discover things and of course there's tons of – if you looked at my office – piles and piles and stacks of paper and only certain parts of those stacks make it into your published scholarship, right? So you must have all kinds of files and papers and scraps from when you were working on Sarah that didn't make it into your selected edition. So I'm wondering, were there any mysteries you felt like, "Oh, I found detail X or this or that thing and I couldn't follow up on it or I never figured it out"? Is there anything like that lingering in the past that maybe nagged at you or you wished you could have found more?

LM: There's a lot, Elizabeth, I mean, you know.

ER: That's why I'm asking! Are there any things you could *share*, and it might light a fire under a student out there or a future scholar to figure out?

LM: You know that's something--and something I think I'll try to make a list for you.

ER: That'd be fantastic!

LM: You know like Sean [Sean E. Andres, a marketing professional and non-academic Piatt researcher working in the Cincinnati area on public history projects] is doing there in North Bend, in Cincinnati, and where she was and what about the fire [at her home River Brow]? What was lost? Did she lose a baby? Was it a stillborn? Did she lose a couple babies?

ER: Judging from the poems. And again we're coming back to that important topic that students have to confront all of the time: to what extent are the poems in a dramatic voice that is *not* her and to what extent is she writing about something that happened to her? Right?

LM: Exactly. Yes, and that little cemetery there in North Bend where they probably just buried maybe a baby? We don't know. She'd go there and she would just – these poems would just pour out this grief. That's where she might have been when she did it. I mean, the more we can find out about her life

would be the dream thing. I mean just as much as students can go and find these details of her life. What'd they do in England? Back when she came back to London for that year after she was in Ireland? Who'd she meet? What were the connections, you know? Was Yeats there, you know? Marian. What was Marian doing? All these things that were going on, and if you can even dig back into Kentucky and what was it like there at Henry Female Seminary and things like that. And get other information and just flesh things out. Gosh, just off the top of my head there's so many questions; I know if I thought about it awhile I could come up with some real intriguing things. I mean what-- the relationship with John! What was it really like? It seems to be -- she mentions sex in oblique ways and stuff. What was it like and how did she really feel about him? You know, she complains because he couldn't make any money and he was just superficial and couldn't really talk to him about deeper things.

ER: And when you say she complains, are you reading that through the poems?

LM: Yeah, through the poems.

ER: Okay, you're not thinking that you found her saying this in a letter or something like that?

LM: No. And what is the tone of the letters? She was kind of formal. I mean, she was an aristocrat, and you know the question you were talking about of trying to find the slave? [The woman formerly enslaved by Sarah's maternal family about whom Sarah wrote in several poems, including her 1872 poem "The Black Princess."] You know?

ER: Since Sarah grew up in a family of planters, there were human beings that her family owned and we need to find out who those people were.

LM: Yeah, with her mother dying when she was eight [her mother, Mary A. Spiers Bryan, died in, 1844] and passed around from these different plantations and there were slave owners and the slave that cared for her; that came back later; was with her later [that is, in North Bend, OH, after the Civil War, a

situation recorded in the 1872 poem "Over in Kentucky"]. We were talking about, some of the students are interested in her.

ER: And the poem of Sarah's called "The Black Princess" [published in 1872] talks about this woman, and Larry and I were discussing recently that someone, perhaps myself, needs to get down into the papers in Kentucky to figure out where to find out if we have records of the names of the [enslaved] human beings that were--.

LM: That were on those plantations.

ER: That the Bryan family owned [as well as her mother's family, the Spiers family, also spelled "Spires" in primary records] and see if we can find out who the Black Princess was. What was her name? When was she born? When was she purchased, etc.? And try to find out details about those names, right?

LM: There's so much, and there has to be records because, I mean they were Boones! They were Bryans! They were famous families. There has to be a lot of stuff survived, and Annie Boone [Sarah's paternal aunt] who was so important to her, and all of these things, you know? And then the connection with-- who was the boyfriend or whoever she was in love with that died in the Civil War in "Giving Back the Flower"? Or other references, when she writes about that. Does she have those regrets--maybe she if he would have lived, she'd have married – and her life would have been different. Was John really the one, you know? All of those things. All of those things we know so little about.

ER: That's actually a very very fitting place for us to wrap up our conversation then. There's so much to be done. There's so much to be discovered. We have lots of poems, but we don't have a lot of biographical information apart from the poems.

LM: And background to the poems.

ER: Yes. That's one of the really big jobs that needs to be done.

LM: Yeah, because your research over there in Ireland helped so much with some of those Irish poems, you know and … yeah. So everybody get to work. Everybody get to work!

ER: Yes, we want to crowdsource this, get everybody to help! Well, thank you, Larry, so much, for taking the time to record this interview. I know that our audience is going to learn a lot from it and appreciate all your scholarship and all your support for Piatt scholars present and future. Thank you.

LM: Thank you. Thank you very much.